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SLOC Interdiction Revisited: Recent Soviet Writings on Interdicting NATO's Sea Lines of Communication

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**SLOC Interdiction Revisited:
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Interdicting NATO's Sea Lines
of Communication** [REDACTED]

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Summary

Several articles on wartime interdiction of sea lines of communication (SLOC) have appeared in Soviet open-source journals over the last three or four years. Although the frequency of their appearance suggests an increased Soviet interest in this mission, the substance of the articles does not appear to signal a change in Soviet naval mission priorities. *Morskoy Sbornik* articles by Vice Admiral K. Stalbo and Rear Admiral A. Pushkin, for example, indicate that SLOC interdiction continues to be regarded as a secondary mission. (Pushkin says "tertiary.") According to these authors, the main wartime business of modern navies is to deliver nuclear strikes against enemy territory and to defend the homeland from enemy strikes from the sea. [REDACTED]

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Other articles in the same journal by Vice Admiral A. Gontayev and Captain Second Rank N. Kabalin appear to assign more importance to SLOC. These authors, quoting Western naval leaders, say that combat on the sea lines of communication can affect the "course and outcome" of the land war in Europe. Although some Western naval analysts have argued that these articles should be interpreted as oblique statements of Soviet doctrine that upgrade the importance of SLOC interdiction, they also readily can be taken at face value as reports on the Western viewpoint. We do not believe, therefore, that Gontayev's and Kabalin's articles should be viewed as authoritative statements of doctrinal change without corroborating evidence from other sources. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Moreover, we see no evidence in writings or exercises that the Soviets are deemphasizing other missions in a way that would free additional submarines for SLOC interdiction.

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**SLOC Interdiction Revisited:
Recent Soviet Writings on
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of Communication** [redacted]

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Introduction

The Soviets seem to believe that wartime interdiction of NATO's North Atlantic sea lines of communication (SLOC) would be a secondary mission that would have less-than-decisive impact on the outcome of a war in Europe. This judgment is based on evidence provided by Soviet military writings and naval exercises throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. These sources consistently demonstrate that Soviet naval planners believe they must concentrate their efforts on defending the USSR from nuclear strikes from the sea and ensuring that Soviet ballistic missile submarines survive long enough to deliver nuclear strikes against NATO land targets. [redacted]

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Over the last three or four years, several articles on SLOC interdiction during World War II and the wartime importance of the North Atlantic sea lanes have appeared in Soviet open-source journals. The relative frequency and substance of these articles have led some Western naval analysts to argue that the Soviets have upgraded the importance of wartime SLOC interdiction. This paper examines some of these articles for evidence of continuity and change in Soviet thinking. [redacted]

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[redacted] to help identify trends in Soviet thinking on SLOC interdiction. [redacted]

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Nature of Open-Source Writings

Use of Soviet literature to identify changes in Soviet military thinking is complicated by the apparent reluctance of Soviet authors to discuss openly their own views on military subjects. Rather, Soviet open-source articles on SLOC interdiction usually either describe World War II interdiction efforts by the German, Soviet, and allied navies or address NATO's wartime dependence on, and plans to protect, the Atlantic sea lanes. Moreover, most Soviet statements on SLOC interdiction are couched as Western views on the subject. Almost every Soviet statement on SLOC interdiction includes a phrase such as "as foreign specialists think" or "in the eyes of Western specialists." [redacted]

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Some students of Soviet military literature maintain that, as a rule of thumb, when Soviet authors ascribe a particular position to Western authorities or observers, they really are stating the Soviet viewpoint. That obviously is true in some cases. Some Soviet articles, for example, have referred to an opinion among Western naval experts that SSBNs are vulnerable and must be protected by other forces—a well-known Soviet

belief, held by few in the West. But in many instances Soviet authors seem to reliably report Western views. In these cases it is just as reasonable to believe that the author intended to inform a Soviet audience about Western opinion, in much the same way as Western military journals seek to inform their readers. Alternatively, it also is possible that an author wished to express an opinion that differs from the accepted Soviet view by ascribing it to Western opinions. It is safer, therefore, to treat each Soviet article separately, considering the author's position and background and comparing what is said with information from other intelligence sources. [redacted]

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What the Soviets Are Saying

Continuity

Articles by Soviet naval officers in *Morskoy Sbornik* and the General Staff's journal *Voyennaya Mysl'* during the 1970s provide a fairly clear picture of Soviet thinking on the relative importance of wartime SLOC interdiction. Among the more authoritative statements are articles by Vice Admiral K. A. Stalbo and Rear Admiral N. P. V'yunenko, two prominent naval theoreticians with close ties to the commander in chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergey Gorshkov. Stalbo and V'yunenko, who between them probably authored much of Gorshkov's book *The Sea Power of the State*, wrote that the advent of nuclear weaponry in both the Soviet and NATO navies, particularly submarine-launched ballistic and cruise missiles, had fundamentally changed the nature of naval warfare by greatly increasing a navy's ability to strike strategically important targets deep within the enemy's territory. As a result, more traditional missions such as destroying the enemy's fleet and severing sea lines of communication had become secondary to the main wartime task of striking land targets—often called the "battle against the shore" in Soviet writings. In the March 1971 edition of *Voyennaya Mysl'*, for example, Stalbo said:

Thus it is believed that naval forces, which have sharply increased their combat capabilities, have become a major strategic factor capable of directly engaging vitally important objectives located in the enemy's heartland, capable of exerting swift, direct, and sometimes decisive influence on the course of the war. In connection with this, the oceans and seas have lost their past traditional significance—as solely the arena for the clash of naval forces of belligerent nations in battle along sea communications or in amphibious operations. They have become vast areas for the launching of naval ballistic missiles fired from submarines and aircraft taking off from the decks of attack carriers.

Although this statement was cast as the opinion of foreign experts, it clearly reflects information on Soviet military thinking [redacted]

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[redacted] We regard it, therefore, as authoritative.

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Many of the open-source articles appearing in the last three years demonstrate continuity in the Soviet view of wartime SLOC interdiction. In a November 1982 article in *Morskoy Sbornik* about German anti-SLOC efforts in 1942, for example, Rear Admiral A. Pushkin asserts that American and British efforts against German U-boats did not have a decisive impact upon the war. He criticizes "bourgeois falsifiers of history" who wrongly assign "enormous importance to the 'battle of the Atlantic,' considering it one of the main factors that determined the outcome of World War II." In a commonplace formulation for Soviet naval authors denigrating the importance of SLOC, he goes on to say that it was the Russian army's effort on the Eastern Front, not American and British ASW efforts, that decided the outcome of the war in the Atlantic. He concludes his article by saying that, although nuclear-powered submarines have greatly increased the potential to disrupt wartime shipping, and NATO practices convoy protection measures in numerous exercises, warfare on the sea lanes is not a top-priority mission for Western navies:

The growth in the striking force of modern weapons and the expanded capabilities of all the branches of the armed forces led to reevaluation of the priority of missions in naval warfare. In a number of Western countries, the principal missions are now naval actions against targets on the shore, while destroying enemy strike groupings has become secondary, and fighting on sea lanes plays a tertiary part. [REDACTED]

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Pushkin's article provides a good example of the practice of casting Soviet naval theory as Western opinion. Western naval officers consistently describe controlling the North Atlantic sea lanes as vital to NATO's chance of success in a war in Europe. It is the Soviets, not Western naval authorities, that usually downplay the importance of SLOC. Pushkin's assertion that naval actions directed against the enemy's territory constitute the primary naval mission, on the other hand, is a direct lift from previous writings by authoritative Soviet authors such as Gorshkov, Stalbo, and V'yunenکو. In this case, it is reasonable to assume that Pushkin is obliquely stating Soviet views. [REDACTED]

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An October 1983 article by Vice Admiral Stalbo also reflects considerable continuity with his earlier writings, particularly the Soviet view of wartime naval mission priorities. Stalbo writes that the primary purpose of naval forces, in "the Pentagon's view," is to deliver nuclear strikes against enemy land targets. Although this sounds like the Soviets' "battle against the shore," it also reasonably states the importance the US and NATO assign to SSBNs. Stalbo goes on to say, however, that "the basic problems of organizational development and employment of the US Navy stem from missions of employing the strategic submarine nuclear system and its support forces." Here Stalbo seems to be

describing the important Soviet naval mission of supporting and protecting SSBNs—a mission foreign to the US and other NATO navies. []

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According to Stalbo, ASW against enemy SSBNs and power projection, in turn, are the next most important missions for the US Navy. Stalbo concludes his list of American naval missions with a discussion of the need to protect the transoceanic sea lines of communication, "an important factor in the integrity of the military organism of NATO." []

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Although much of what he says about American naval missions can be taken at face value, the apparent allusions to the "battle against the shore" and SSBN protection missions suggest that Stalbo is describing his own—and probably the Soviet naval hierarchy's—opinion rather than merely reporting Western views. In any case, Stalbo places combat on the SLOC fourth on his list. Virtually all students of Soviet behavior believe that the Soviets list things in priority order. This seems to be the case with Stalbo, who clearly continues to treat warfare on the sea lines of communication as secondary to the strategic nuclear strike, SSBN protection, and ASW against enemy SSBN missions. []

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Change?

Some recent open-source articles appear to deviate somewhat from the standard Soviet formulation that combat on the sea lines of communication would not have a decisive impact on a war in Europe. The most notable of these is an article by Vice Admiral A. Gontayev entitled "Combat Operations of Submarines on Sea Lanes of Communication," that appeared in the January 1983 issue of *Morskoy Sbornik*. Much of the article is dedicated to SLOC interdiction during World War II, making the standard Soviet assessment that combat on the sea lanes was not decisive. Gontayev says, however, that a future NATO-Warsaw Pact war would not be a strictly continental war like World War II. The USSR is now faced with a coalition of seapowers, and combat in ocean theaters will have a greater impact upon the outcome of the war, according to Gontayev. This means that:

Transoceanic communications, nowadays, in the opinion of foreign specialists, have become the most important factor that determines the course and the outcome of war in continental theaters of military operations.

Gontayev backs up this point by stating that protecting the North Atlantic SLOC "comprises the content of the overwhelming majority of naval maneuvers and exercises of the navies of the NATO bloc." []

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In a similar vein to Gontayev, a June 1984 *Morskoy Sbornik* article by Captain Second Rank Kabalin states that US leaders believe that SLOC "are now becoming the most important factor determining the course and outcome of war in continental theaters of military operations." He quotes NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT), US Navy Admiral W. McDonald as saying "stoppage or substantial disruption of shipments are fraught with defeat for NATO in Europe." The bulk of Kabalin's article is dedicated to describing the Western concepts of defending SLOC through "protected zones" and "protected sea lanes" and two large-scale NATO naval exercises—United Effort '83 and Ocean Safari '83—that focused on defending North Atlantic sea lanes. []

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Some Western naval analysts believe that articles like Gontayev's and Kabalin's should be considered authoritative statements of a change in the Soviet military's view of wartime SLOC interdiction. They argue that Gontayev and Kabalin are using allegedly Western opinions to obliquely state official Soviet views. In particular, these analysts point to both authors' assertion that combat on the sea lines of communication can "determine the course and outcome" of the war in the land theaters as a significant upgrading of the Soviet SLOC interdiction mission. If Gontayev and Kabalin are obliquely stating the official viewpoint, then their use of the "course and outcome" formulation suggests that the Soviets now view SLOC interdiction as a decisive task. In Soviet writings, a decisive military action is one that affects the "course and outcome" of the conflict. Admiral Gorshkov used this formulation in his book *The Sea Power of the State* to assert that modern navies armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles now could play a decisive role in a global war.

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Interpreting the Gontayev and Kabalin articles as expressions of a change in Soviet doctrine presents two problems. First, they contain nothing new. The Western view that combat on the sea lanes could determine the course and outcome of the war was used previously in articles by Vice Admiral V. Solov'yev and Captain First Rank B. Makeyev in the June 1978 and July 1979 issues of *Morskoy Sbornik*. These earlier articles were not interpreted as oblique statements on Soviet thinking, probably because they appeared at roughly the same time as Gorshkov's *The Sea Power of the State*, which treated open-ocean interdiction of the sea lines of communication as a secondary mission. []

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The other problem is that both the Gontayev and Kabalin articles can be interpreted readily as factual reports on Western naval opinion. Western naval leaders do assign great importance to controlling the sea lines of communication during a war in Europe and have often stated that

interruption of the flow of Western shipping spells defeat for NATO. Gontayev and Kabalin also are correct in saying that protection of Atlantic shipping plays an important role in NATO naval exercises. Unlike some writings which clearly seem to use Western opinion to state Soviet views, we cannot say with any degree of confidence that the Gontayev and Kabalin articles represent an authoritative statement of a shift in Soviet views. []

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**What the Articles
Do Not Say**

On balance, we do not believe that the recent open-source writings signal an upgrade in the priority of the Soviet anti-SLOC mission. As demonstrated by the Stalbo and Pushkin articles, the Soviets still seem to believe that the main business of navies during a NATO-Warsaw Pact war will be to deliver, and defend their homelands against, nuclear strikes from the sea. Both of these articles acknowledge a need for wartime attacks on NATO's sea lines but place it in perspective to more critical tasks. The Gontayev and Kabalin articles, on the other hand, lack such perspective, merely reporting on the criticality to NATO of the North Atlantic sea lanes. Given the contrast with Stalbo and Pushkin, we do not believe the Gontayev and Kabalin articles should be interpreted as official pronouncements of Soviet doctrine without corroborating evidence from other sources. []

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If the Soviets had upgraded the priority of their anti-SLOC mission, we would expect to see them deploying a number of submarines along the probable routes of NATO wartime convoys as part of major Northern Fleet exercises. These exercises, however, continue to stress an echeloned defense of the sea approaches to the USSR and Soviet SSBN bastions. They contain little, if any, activity that can be equated to open-ocean interdiction of NATO's sea lanes. []

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An increased emphasis on SLOC interdiction would require the commitment of a considerable number of attack submarines. Our estimates of Soviet production trends, however, show the number of general purpose submarines declining by as much as 10 percent over the next 10 years.

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The Soviets also could increase the number of submarines available for anti-SLOC missions by deemphasizing other wartime missions. But there is no evidence [] that the Soviets have downgraded their anticarrier, anti-SSBN, or SSBN-protection missions which, we estimate, will tie down some three-quarters of the Soviet

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Northern and Pacific Fleets' general purpose submarines. The Soviets, in other words, do not seem to be building or structuring the kind of future submarine force that would facilitate a large-scale anti-SLOC effort at the same time as they pursued their other important missions.

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A New Debate?

It also is possible that there is an ongoing debate among Soviet naval theoreticians about the SLOC interdiction mission. Renewed Soviet interest in SLOC interdiction at this time may be a byproduct of American interest in protracted conventional warfare. As evidenced by their open-source literature, the Soviets are concerned about the emphasis that current US leaders place on being prepared for a protracted war against the Warsaw Pact. The Soviets have long held that SLOC interdiction could become a more important mission if a NATO-Warsaw Pact war became protracted. G. M. Sturua, for example, in the November 1982 issue of the Soviet journal *USA: Economics, Politics and Ideology*, wrote that the development of a US capability for protracted conventional warfare "presupposed the ability to guarantee the uninterrupted functioning of ocean communications and the disruption of enemy communications." Authors such as Gontayev and Kabalin could be using Western opinion to obliquely question the conventional Soviet wisdom. They may believe that Soviet naval theory now places too much emphasis on conducting missions in a short, inevitably nuclear campaign to the detriment of preparation for interdicting enemy SLOC as part of a protracted conventional war.

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It is difficult to say, based on these articles alone, that a debate on SLOC interdiction is under way. We know that the Soviets use their military journals to discuss differing viewpoints on military subjects. Such a debate appeared in the pages of *Morskoy Sbornik* in 1982 and 1983 concerning Stalbo's views on "the theory of the Navy." Several authors subsequently attacked Stalbo openly. Unlike the Gontayev and Kabalin articles, however, these articles clearly took issue with another Soviet author. If a similar debate on SLOC interdiction is unfolding, we should start to see more pointed articles—probably cast as Western views—about the role of navies in protracted war. An article extolling the importance of SLOC interdiction by an authoritative spokesman such as Admiral Gorshkov—who produced an article in 1983 ending the Stalbo debate—would give us a clue as to who was winning the debate.

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